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Gridlock in Springfield will mean gridlock on suburban highways, with \$1.5 billion in public transit improvements in jeopardy, federal lawmakers warned Tuesday.

U.S. Reps. Melissa Bean and Mark Kirk added their voices to a growing chorus critical of the General Assembly's failure to pass a capital projects program.

Without a capital budget that guarantees state funds, matching federal dollars for improving two key Metra Union Pacific routes and building the STAR line to connect Cook, DuPage and Will counties are at risk, both cautioned during a news conference with Metra officials.

About \$1.5 billion in federal aid is at stake, said Kirk, a Highland Park Republican.

"Inaction in Springfield will lead to a huge windfall for other states that have their act together," he said.

Bean, a Barrington Democrat, added, "Mass transit is critical to suburban areas to ease congestion, improve the environment and open opportunities for those unable to drive."

The General Assembly has gone into overtime as leaders struggle to find common ground on a capital projects bill and funding for the cash-strapped Regional Transportation Authority.

Metra Executive Director Phil Pagano said the Federal Transit Administration told him improvements to the Union Pacific West and Northwest lines, were on hold until the state paid its share.

That means delays in fixing the so-called "commuter railroad Hillside Strangler" in Chicago where the Union Pacific-West and three other lines converge.

Metra planned to modernize the bottleneck, which was necessary before constructing the STAR line. Now, all these projects are threatened, as is Metra's overall performance, Pagano said.

"Remember what it was like in early 1982 and 1983 when our on-time performance was 76 percent?" he asked. "We had cars where you could look down at the floor and see road bed. If there's not a capital bill, it won't be long for that to reappear."

Officials with the Federal Transit Administration would not comment on political issues or confirm that federal dollars would be yanked if no state funding was forthcoming soon.

But an agency spokesman said the FTA told Metra last week it was ready to proceed with preliminary engineering on the Union Pacific work but needed to see a reliable local source of funding first.

On Monday, House Speaker Michael Madigan proposed a massive gambling expansion program that would fund new capital projects. Gov. Rod Blagojevich and other state leaders are reviewing the plan, a spokesman said.

State Rep. Julie Hamos, an Evanston Democrat who has sought to increase RTA funding, said the criticism of the General Assembly was warranted but was hopeful a solution is in sight.

"I believe there is movement as we get closer to a transit doomsday," she said.

Bean and Kirk also unveiled a report by the Suburban Transportation Commission, a coalition of transportation agencies plus state and local officials. The study found the state's mass transit systems are inadequate for the growing needs of suburban commuters.